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Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods, by Jas Elsner and Ian Rutherford

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Scholars in Roman history, the study of the ancient Mediterranean, and early Christian studies have recently taken great interest in travel, ancient ethnography, religious experience, historical memory, ritual practice, and representation of the other and the barbarian.¹ *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* takes part in this welcome interdisciplinary inclination to bring together in a sustained way the likes of Pausanias and Egeria. The volume's editors, Elsner and Rutherford, are up to the task. Elsner, famous for his work on art and vision in the Roman and early Christian world, was already a co-editor of *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece*.² In that volume appears an excellent essay by Rutherford on Pausanias and pilgrimage; in this and in his comparison of Greek and Indian pilgrimage we find the foundations of Rutherford's work on the topic.³

Most of the papers in the volume had their origin in a 2000 conference at the University of Reading. Each paper treats at least briefly the difficulty of defining and theorizing pilgrimage; each offers up a focused set of evidence, whether literary, archaeological, epigraphic, or some combination, regarding travel and cult practice in Mediterranean antiquity. Organized chronologically, the volume comprises seventeen essays and begins with classical and Hellenistic pilgrimage, moves to pilgrimage in the Roman empire, and concludes with Jewish and Christian pilgrimage. I provide a lengthy review so that the reader can immediately ascertain which chapters will be useful to her, since each essay is rich, but the subjects of analysis vary a great deal.

Elsner and Rutherford's introduction serves as a useful primer to the knotty problems of theorizing pilgrimage. The editors seek a path that exploits the usefulness of the category without importing fuzzy criteria to distinguish the pilgrim from the tourist, such as the quality of a pilgrim's belief. The introduction briefly treats anthropological approaches to pilgrimage. Victor and Edith Turner's model, which sees pilgrimage as offering liminality and *communitas*, is critiqued here, but nonetheless makes its way

into most of the book's contributions.

To wrestle with the problem of defining pilgrimage in Mediterranean antiquity, the editors produce a typology. Criteria include questions about the spatial relation between sanctuary and clientele (catchment area), the identity of the pilgrims (e.g., private or official representatives), timetable of the visit, activity at the sanctuary, and motivation for travel (11-12). The typology is divided into three sections that correspond to the chronological divisions of the book. Under the category of classical and Hellenistic Greece alone, fourteen types of pilgrimage are treated; the typology, which is intended to aid the reader, is instead overwhelming. The typology is used to propose that fundamental changes in the "cultural epistêmê" (31) occurred from the classical period to the fourth century. The structuring of the typologies according to the parts of the book, chronologically organized, allows the editors to be responsible to the particularities of each culture and era. But this organization also contravenes a key goal of the book, which is to think creatively and comparatively and in so doing to shake up the scholarly consensus around travel and the sacred. One would hope that volumes like this would allow for more comparative work in the religions of antiquity, broadly construed chronologically, so that healing cults of Asklepios, for example, could be analyzed alongside the late fourth-century Christian John Chrysostom's violent rhetoric against a Jewish healing site of healing at Matrona near Antioch. The introduction and the contributions that follow (each summarized in the last section of the introduction) nonetheless still manage to provoke these very questions, which seem to me to be at the heart of the enterprise and one of the major contributions of the volume.

Part I: Classical and Hellenistic Pilgrimage

Barbara Kowalzig's excellent "Mapping out *Communitas*: Performances of *Theôria* in their Sacred and Political Context" asks whether the Turners' concept of *communitas* can help in the interpretation of epigraphic and literary evidence regarding rituals connected with *theôriai*. The performance of ritual allows for "an alternative form of social organization often complementing, but quite as often competing with, political or other groupings" (44-45). Focusing on the Panionia, the Hymn to the Greatest Kouros (or Hymn to Zeus) at Crete, and the Samothracian mysteries, Kowalzig analyzes the interaction of traveling ritual communities with the *poleis* they visit for worship. She addresses the question of how various *poleis* interact with each other in the context of such religious rituals, and how ethnicity functions or is re-formed in such contexts.

Fred Naiden's "*Hiketai* and *Theôroi* at Epidauros" takes up a philological problem: What is the difference between these two key terms, which we generally render "pilgrim"? *Hiketai* are more interested, Naiden argues, in healing rituals; comparative evidence of a healing site in Brazil is adduced in order to show how elsewhere and at a different time, watching and seeking a cure are not differentiated. The bulk of the

chapter investigates inscriptions. The Epidaurian *iamata*, according to Naiden, offer quasi-legal documents - "depositions" (93) -- about the interaction between the supplicants and the gods. The *hiketês* becomes a watcher as s/he peruses these "advertisements" about the gods. The Brazilian example, as well as references to Mary Douglas and Jonathan Z. Smith, could have been developed more; nevertheless, the chapter innovatively frames the Epidaurian inscriptions in terms of the perhaps skeptical and certainly needy traveler.

Michael Arnush's "Pilgrimage to the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi: Patterns of Public and Private Consultation" investigates the waning of the Delphic oracle's political force in the fourth century. The demise of the oracle is usually explained in terms of the rise of the autonomous *polis*, which did not need oracular help in its politics, or in terms of a changing religious attitude - basically, one of skepticism and "sophistic rejection of traditional belief" (98). Arnush offers a more nuanced reading of evidence (mostly epigraphic), analyzing how the oracle was deeply imbricated in the politics and material conditions of its time: Spartan influence, Macedonian control, earthquake, Phocian occupation. Once Alexander ceased to need Delphi to legitimize a Panhellenic program, for example, he offered more support to oracles at Didyma and Siwa. What one wishes to know from this fascinating article -- but this is unfair, since it only glances at the Roman period -- is how Arnush would read Plutarch's rhetoric and Hadrian's interest in Delphi.

Scott Scullion's "'Pilgrimage' and Greek Religion: Sacred and Secular in the Pagan *Polis*" resists the flow of the book. Concerned that we take seriously the uniqueness of various Greek practices before comparing them with other practices, Scullion questions whether there was such a thing as Greek pilgrimage at all. He engages philology exploration to determine the nature of larger phenomena in the Greek world. For example, he looks at the character of *Theôria* in Aristophanes' *Peace* and at the term as it appears in Epidaurian inscriptions, concluding that the term is largely profane -- not at all religious. Scullion's true concern emerges in his comment: "Far too often nowadays the truism that in Greece sacred and secular tend to be linked turns into a sort of omnisacralization that borders on the absurd, as though all those attending a panhellenic festival considered themselves on a sacred mission -- jetsetters, jocks, schmoozing politicians, purveyors of sausage or of victory odes, bookies, hookers, hooligans, the lot" (125). They are "human beings like you and I," just traveling. Certainly true. But rather than dismissing such festival participation as profane, we should question the binary of sacred and profane, and take up one of Scullion's earlier critiques: that our scholarship, infected by such influences as Protestantism or Weber, has looked more for orthodoxy (that is, for belief) than for orthopraxy (118). Where would a robust look at practice, rather than belief, lead us in our understanding of the religiosity of the ancient Mediterranean world?

Rutherford's "Down-Stream to the Cat-Goddess: Herodotus on Egyptian Pilgrimage" opens with six festivals that Herodotus lists in his ethnographic survey of Egypt. Since

there is no strong evidence for widespread pilgrimage to these festivals, he extends the definition of pilgrimage to consider "the symbolic journey of a deity from one temple to another" (136), evidence for which we find in a sacred law written at Edfu in the late Hellenistic/early Roman period. Thus Rutherford's challenging task is to piece together from scant evidence something about pilgrimage in Egypt. Evidence, such as a first-century BCE hieroglyphic stele from Buto which hints at frequent pilgrimage, also raises questions of Greek influence on perception of and practice in Egyptian cult: Did Greeks look for pilgrimage and so impose them in their interpretations of Egyptian cult? How did Egyptian cults react? Much of the chapter focuses on the *communitas* of pilgrimage to Boubastis that seems to celebrate a goddess who has many associations; this pilgrimage may have been a "truly pan-Egyptian phenomenon (149) because of the syncretism of various Egyptian goddesses.

In her "The Philosopher at the Festival: Plato's Transformation of Traditional *Theôria*" Andrea Wilson Nightingale convincingly argues that Plato's discussions of *theôria* or contemplation deliberately evoke practices of pilgrimage to panhellenic festivals. She finds such imagery in key places: the opening of the *Republic*, which begins discussing an actual *theôria* for Bendis in Piraeus and then comes to replace attending the festival with the pilgrimage of the intellect; the story of the myth of Er, where Socrates is depicted as newly defining philosophizing in light of *theôria* (those who are "lovers of sights," especially); the *theôria* of the allegory of the cave; in the *Symposium*, the evocation of the language of the mysteries at Eleusis; in the *Phaedrus*, the language of *theôria* in which even the gods participate, seeing the Forms. The chapter attempts to apply the Turners' idea of liminality: Nightingale argues that the moment of being at festival is somehow liminal or less political, a panhellenic moment that dissolves and retains *polis* identity. One wonders how she would read Kowalzig's or Arnush's piece about the gatherings of *poleis* and the politics of panhellenism.

Part II: Pilgrimage in the Roman Empire

Part II, Pilgrimage in the Roman Empire, does not start with a discussion of pilgrimage per se, but with Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis's fascinating "The Body in Space: Visual Dynamics in Graeco-Roman Healing Pilgrimage," which is full of useful plans and photographs of busts and the *Lex Sacra* inscription. In the second-century CE, the Asklepios sanctuary at Pergamon was reconfigured. A new peristyle court framed older buildings; a new but conservative propylon contrasted with the innovation of a pantheon-like temple to Zeus Asklepios. Petsalis-Diomidis makes the interesting observation that the re-ordering of the sanctuary contrasted with the disordered bodies of the ill supplicants there; the controls of the architecture and of the *Lex Sacra*, found at Pergamon in an inscription, stood in contrast to the pilgrim's own chaos. The author emphasizes how second-century architecture, votives, and aspects of the reconfigured topography offered a new visual rhetoric about the truth of the god.

Staying in Roman Asia Minor, George Williamson in "Mucianus and a Touch of the Miraculous: Pilgrimage and Tourism in Roman Asia Minor" focuses on Mucianus, three times consul and imperial legate to Lycia and Pamphylia some time after 57 CE. Although extant writings are fragmentary, contained only in Pliny's *Natural History* (and usefully collected in an appendix to the chapter), Williamson argues that the writings were memoirs from Mucianus's retirement, concerned particularly with "a religious topography" (238) from his travels. Williamson attempts to tease out Mucianus's intention, pointing to the credulity (rather than solely aesthetic or historical interests) he seems to bring to the sites. Mucianus stands alongside Herodotus and the travelers of the second sophistic; he offers "an autoptic experience of wonder" (244) which is not quite tourism and not precisely pilgrimage but "closes" "the gap" (246) between the two.

Marco Galli's provocative chapter, "Pilgrimage as Elite *Habitus*: Educated Pilgrims in the Sacred Landscape During the Second Sophistic," shifts from the majority of chapters in this book in using Pierre Bourdieu rather than the Turners as the dominant anthropological model for the analysis of pilgrimage, although it could be clearer in its explanation of Bourdieu's usefulness. Second sophistic texts, such as those of Plutarch, represent "internal states of sacred experience" (254) and use *paideia* to "[reactivate] mental images and [make] them collectively accessible" (255). Galli, interested in the psychology of ancient pilgrimage, compares Freud's and Pausanias's accounts of the Athenian acropolis, coming to the provocative conclusion that "place should not be considered a passive recipient but an active product of an intellectual and psychological process that is activated by the intellect of the observer" (263). While a reader might wish for greater clarity and explanation, Galli's article is a welcome provocation of the historical imagination.

William Hutton's "The Construction of Religious Space in Pausanias" turns to the popular question of whether Pausanias can be read as a pilgrim, referring to him "as a pilgrim of sorts" (297), engaged in a "cognitive mapping" of the place he visits. Pausanias's careful and brief rendering of Corinth, that razed city, reveals that he creates a classicizing symmetry and order where there is none. "His treatment of Corinth here replicates in small scale the strategies he employs in his treatment of the entire territory of Greece" (313). Hutton challenges his readers to think about Pausanias as a kind of time-traveler -- a pilgrim to a nonexistent past, who excises buildings and sites in order to lead the reader by the hand to that high moment in the life of ancient Greece.

Andrew Fear's "A Journey to the End of the World" discusses the city of Cadiz and its temple to the Phoenician god Melqart, who came to be understood as Hercules. This town in Spain was an important site, visited especially by Roman military leaders who may have wished to consult an oracle there. Fear emphasizes that the city was also important because it lay beyond the edge of the earth -- beyond the Pillars of Herakles.

Thus for someone like Philostratos, it is a pendant to India for Apollonius's exotic and educational travels. Yet Cadiz also represents the east in the west, insofar as Phoenician traditions are continued there.

Jane Lightfoot's engaging "Pilgrims and Ethnographers: In Search of the Syrian Goddess," takes up another aspect of *De dea Syria*, treated so well in her edition and commentary. She begins with a broad question inspired by the challenge of reconciling literary and epigraphic evidence: "Is there any sense of disjunction between religious centres that have become visible, or amenable, to classical observation, and 'native' cult centres in the culture of Roman Syria -- or is that a false disjunction?" (335). Lightfoot's piece collates what little data there is about Hierapolis/Manbog (literary, numismatic, and archaeological) and provokes questions about whether continuing emphasis on indigenous rather than Hellenizing forms of the cult indicates "a rejection of Greekness" (338). She concludes that Lucian uses vocabulary that indicates that the cult of Atargatis is "a Syrian answer to Greece's pan-Hellenic centres" (346).

Sarolta Takács's "Divine and Human Feet: Records of Pilgrims Honouring Isis" interprets widespread Isis worship (from Philae, Delos, and a wide swath of the Roman empire) indicated by representations of feet, mostly first century CE or later. Takács argues carefully that some reliefs hint at the dedicator's own position, walking into the cella of a temple; thus one interpretation of these inscriptions and relief and incised feet is that they indicate pilgrimage. Others seem to speak of the footprints of the gods.

Part III: Jewish and Christian Pilgrimage

Part III of the volume addresses Jewish and Christian Pilgrimage. While this section makes a strong contribution in addressing literary texts, it does not present the rich analysis of material culture found in previous sections of the volume.

David Noy's "Rabbi Aqiba Comes to Rome: A Jewish Pilgrimage in Reverse?" uses a story from the Talmud -- the accounts of four rabbis who traveled to Rome perhaps at the end of the first century CE -- to "throw some light on what it was like for influential people from Palestine to travel to Rome" (376). Ancient sources assume that regular contact existed between Jews in Palestine and in Rome. Noy interprets such travel not as simple tourism to the center of empire, but as Jewish pilgrimage to see cult objects captured from Jerusalem in 70 CE, placed in Vespasian's Temple of Peace. Such travel, he argues, substituted for pilgrimage to the now-destroyed Jerusalem temple; it was a "pilgrimage in reverse" (385).

Wendy Pullan's "'Intermingled Until the End of Time': Ambiguity as a Central Condition of Early Christian Pilgrimage" sees a model of the pilgrim in a variety of biblical terms, such as stranger, alien, exile, and sojourner. She then moves to consider how "pilgrimage offers exile and the hope of a heavenly citizenship" (399). Turning to

survey patristic attitudes toward pilgrimage, she traces the differing opinions of Jerome and Gregory of Nyssa. She concludes with the idea that in pilgrimage we find a "genuine struggle to understand the situation of an individual place as it embodies the universality of the divine" (407). The various parts of the article, each interesting on its own, could have been expanded into different essays.

Jas Elsner's "Piety and Passion: Contest and Consensus in the Audiences for early Christian pilgrimage" juxtaposes literary texts, material objects, and lists of liturgical stations around Jerusalem at epiphany. He emphasizes that these are "fragmentary, scattered, bitty" (415) pieces, which do not necessarily match well with the grand historiographical narratives of early Christian pilgrimage. The historiographies of Gibbon and others (pens dipped deep in the inky well of Protestantism and the Enlightenment) express horror at the credulity and pagan-like excess of early Christian pilgrims. More liturgically oriented historians see pilgrimage as "an ideal of communal spirit among the faithful in a still unified Church" (421). The latter approach, he argues, has interesting parallels with the work of the Turners; this emphasis on *communitas* and egalitarian purity crafts the early Christian pilgrim as "a paradigm of Christian perfection" rather than a "religious fetishist" (423). Elsner encourages art historians to improve upon this historiography by focusing on the audience - that is, on the reception of pilgrimage. Turning to the complexity of early Christian Palestine, Elsner finds there continuing pagan polytheism. In addition, a variety of languages, rites, and theological positions matched the pilgrims' own diversity and mirrored ecclesiastical schisms over heresy that continued throughout the fourth to fifth centuries. With due caution, Elsner suggests that we look more closely for tension and contestation over pilgrimage sites that were shared by those of different theological inclinations, and in doing so he provides a model for a different kind of historiography of early Christian pilgrimage.

David Frankfurter's "Urban Shrine and Rural Saint in Fifth-Century Alexandria" explores the local and translocal. He describes "a Christianity acculturated to the Egyptian landscape and its religious idioms" (433) and, more particularly, an Egyptian environment where ecclesiastically acceptable shrines associated with "biblical" saints might compete with those of local saints. Frankfurter then turns to two cases where local saints lend authority for the installation of "biblical" saints: Archbishop Theophilus's desire to institute a shrine for the three Hebrew youths from the book of Daniel, without any relics present, is guaranteed by a vision of the local saint John the Little. Another story justifies the burial of the local saint Macarion of Tkow alongside John the Baptist and Elisha (on the remains of the old Serapeum) by the miraculous story of the brutal correction -- the death -- of an Alexandrian bishop who had questioned Macarion's worthiness to be buried there. Frankfurter closes with the important question of what was at stake for the later hagiographers still interested in tensions between the local and the translocal.

In this rich collection of scholarship, one wishes for more integration between the

articles: rarely do writers refer to each other, and exciting opportunities for deeper conversations are missed. (To choose one example: What conversation might arise between Hutton, with his idea of "cognitive mapping," and Galli, with his interest in psychology and sacred topography?) The volume is unified of course by theme, and also by an anthropological vibe, with frequent references to the work of the Turners, but there is rarely use of more recent anthropological research. The text itself is well produced, with only a few copyediting problems in Greek and English that were missed in the *errata*, and the images and plans are small but clear. For anyone interested in pilgrimage, travel, and local cult practices in Mediterranean antiquity, it is a volume well worth consulting.

Notes:

- [1.](#) There is a diverse range of such work. See, e.g., Kai Brodersen and Richard Talbert, eds., *Space in the Roman world: its perception and presentation* (Münster: Lit, 2004); sections of Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and memory: early Christian culture making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); François Hartog, *Memories of Odysseus* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001); Georgia Frank, *The memory of the eyes: pilgrims to living saints in Christian late antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Claude Nicolet, *Space, geography, and politics in the early Roman empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).
- [2.](#) Susan Alcock, John Cherry, and Jas Elsner, eds., *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- [3.](#) "Theoria and Darsan: Pilgrimage and Vision in Greece and India," *Classical Quarterly* 50.1 (2000) 133-46.

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